

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 327 096

HE 024 113

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TITLE College and University Planning for State Legislative Relations: Lessons from a Case Study.
PUB DATE 25 Jul 89
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented to the Society for College and Planning (Denver, Colorado, July 25, 1990)
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Collected Works - Conference Proceedings (021) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Budgeting; Case Studies; College Planning; Community Colleges; *Government School Relationship; Higher Education; Institutional Advancement; Land Grant Universities; *Lobbying; Long Range Planning; Planning; Post Secondary Education; Public Officials; *State Aid; *State Legislation; *State Universities
IDENTIFIERS Environmental Scanning

ABSTRACT

Authorities responsible for promoting the cause of public higher education in state legislatures lack appropriate planning guidelines for state legislative relations. A state legislative plan was developed and initiated by a land-grant university with the aim of improving the commitment of state resources to the institution. Appropriations requested and realized were considered the primary measure of plan efficacy. Actual implementation of the planning process has suggested that effective and efficient planning for state legislative relations should include: (1) the incorporation of a continuous environmental scanning process to determine changes in issues, participants and attitudes, both external and internal to the institution; (2) assessment, evaluation and feedback components to assure institutional goal attainment; and (3) development of a continuous year-round process to assure the political viability of institutional decision-making. Charts showing the institutional plan and the planning model for state legislative relations are appended. Includes nine references. (LT)

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ED327096

College and University Planning for State Legislative Relations:

Lessons from a Case Study

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A Paper Presented to the

Society for College and University Planning

Denver, Colorado

July 25, 1989

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College and University Planning for State Legislative Relations:
Lessons from a Case Study

Abstract

State legislatures will assume an increasingly important role in determining post-secondary education financing and policy in the future. Therefore, institutions will need to become more actively involved in state legislative affairs and thus will have a need for more effective institutional planning for state legislative relations. This is a case study of an institutional plan for state legislative relations. The authors report the design and implementation of such a plan and propose a model for college and university planning for effective state legislative relations.

Introduction

The governance and administration of postsecondary education is an increasingly complex task. Hogan and Knight (1987) have attributed the increased complexity of managing postsecondary education to an expansion of the roles and functions performed by colleges and universities, by competitive factors, and by everchanging environmental conditions (p. 9). A major dimension of postsecondary education administration, predicted by Gove and Carpenter (1977) and recently reiterated by Sperry (1989), involves interaction with state legislatures. In the view of Gove and Carpenter, Hogan and Knight, and Sperry, effective state legislative relations result from proper planning.

Unfortunately, those who seek to promote or are responsible for promoting the cause of public higher education in state legislatures have little they can turn to for guidance in their planning efforts. National higher education organizations (e.g., CASE, ACE, NASULGC) may have a government relations component. Usually, however, these government relations efforts are oriented toward federal legislative action (Gove & Carpenter, 1977). In addition, the literature of politics and education tends to be sparse, anecdotal, and related to elementary and secondary education.

Although the literature available to the public higher education advocate may have deficiencies, it does give some

guidance on key considerations of state legislative relations. The planning advice proffered by the literature typically relates to goal identification, organization, and communication (Bernstein, 1985; Mazzoni & Malen, 1985; Medcalf, 1983). Authors have been silent on the reporting of actual plans, their content, and their outcomes. Case study examination is one method by which the feasibility, process, and worth of state legislative relations planning can be assessed (Cohen & Manion, 1985). This paper is a case study describing the development, implementation, and results of a state legislative relations plan of a public post-secondary education institution. A model for institutional planning of state legislative relations is proposed.

Background

The case reported here reflects a plan which was developed in late 1986 by a comprehensive, land-grant university in a predominantly agricultural state. Because of its agricultural nature, the economy of the state had been depressed for six or seven years (Smith, Drabenstatt, & Gibson, 1987). In response to this economic distress, state appropriations to the major research university of the state had been reduced repeatedly. It was anticipated that any additional reductions in state support for the university would result in closure of entire units within the institution.

Previous reductions had been accepted reluctantly by the institution. The reductions in budget in the previous five years had totaled over \$6 million. These reductions resulted in the elimination of thirty faculty positions, thirty-nine staff positions, and the closure of nine academic or service programs in 1985-1986 alone. In addition, during this period of financial instability, a number of faculty and staff members left the institution. One of the most widely publicized closings was that of a two-year program in technical agriculture. The prospect of additional reductions prompted the campus leadership to determine that a pro-active, aggressive posture needed to be taken in regard to the institution's relations with the state legislature. A process was initiated with the purpose of developing a comprehensive plan for the institution's legislative relations program.

The budget reductions in the state affected all of the state's public postsecondary institutions. The state colleges and technical community colleges experienced decreases in funding. This study, however, focuses on the experience of the research university of the state.

Developing a Legislative Plan

A planning team consisting of the director of the alumni association, the director of public information, and the director of university relations was given responsibility for the development of the legislative relations plan. Except for two characteristics which the plan was to reflect, the planning team was given full discretion to perform its task. The two characteristics identified "a priori" were that: (1) the plan must demonstrate an imperative and communicate a sense of urgency, and (2) the plan must integrate the resources of the institution. The first task undertaken by the planning team was to identify a design for the legislative relations plan. The design identified was relatively straightforward and included the following components: goal, objectives, assumptions, themes, elements, and timeline (see Figure 1). The design allowed the team to treat each component of the plan in a discrete and sequential manner.

The planning team identified a goal which was to serve two purposes. The goal, to rebuild, develop, and maintain on-going support for the university, was intended to: (1) provide a general sense of direction for the immediate plan, and (2) provide a reference point for planning in subsequent years.

Three objectives were developed to operationalize the goal. These objectives were intended to provide a means by which outcomes could be measured. The first objective was to achieve

full funding for the university's biennial budget request. This positive objective supported the portion of the broad goal which called for rebuilding the resource base of the university. The first objective was also designed to indicate optimism and overall belief in the plan by the entire university. Finally, this objective was intended to motivate participants in the implementation of the plan.

The second objective of the plan was to prevent further reduction in the institution's budget. This objective was a reserve position to be assumed in the event it became clear that full funding could not be achieved. As mentioned earlier, the university had incurred four mid-year budget reductions in the previous five years. At the time the plan was developed, the financial outlook for the state government was not bright. A perception confronted by the planning team was that during the 1987 state legislative session the institution would do well to merely avoid further funding reductions.

The final objective of the plan was to organize all the university resources in support of the plan. The intent of this objective was to bring together the internal and external constituencies and resources of the institution to promote the interests of the university throughout the state. This objective was intended to support the portion of the goal dealing with maintaining on-going support for the university. The hope of the

planning team was that a relatively permanent coalition of institutional support would emerge from the plan's implementation.

The planning team recognized that certain contingencies would affect the accomplishment of the plan's objectives. These contingencies were identified explicitly as assumed conditions which would be present during plan implementation. The contingencies of the plan were identified as assumptions. The assumptions of the plan included the availability of adequate implementation resources, clear delegation of authority and responsibility for plan implementation, and support and cooperation for the plan from the multiple constituencies of the institution.

The planning group determined that the institution's state legislative relations activity should consist primarily of the statewide delivery of five consistent, sequential, and simple themes. The five themes identified were the state of the state, institutional aspirations, the current institutional condition, challenging misperceptions, and the importance of full state support. The first theme, the state of the state, was intended to create an understanding of what was happening in the state's agriculture-based economy. This theme would remind the state that it is in transition, that it must prepare for the future, and that the future could be viewed with optimism.

The second theme consisted of the explication of the university's aspirations. This theme was intended to link the futures of the state and the university. Messages communicated under this theme would project a vision for the institution and focus on the importance of a comprehensive research university in assisting the state's transition to a broader, more stable economy.

A reiteration of the university's experience of the previous five years was the third theme of the plan. The messages conveyed under this theme recounted the history, effect, and implications of the reductions in state support for the university. Major emphasis was placed on explaining how injurious the reductions had been to the institution's ability to fulfill its and the state's aspirations.

The fourth theme was to identify and confront very specific misperceptions about the university which had been fostered in the prolonged atmosphere of economic distress. Messages included in this theme were a clear identification of the university's priorities and an explanation of the university's relative position in the total allocation of state resources. The fourth theme of the plan was intended to project institutional candor and confidence.

The last theme in the plan's sequence was a statement of the importance of full state support for the university. The message

under this theme consisted of a summation of major points of the preceding four themes.

Plan implementation was organized into three elements. The three elements--media, outreach, and legislative--were selected to integrate and coordinate the university's resources, and to involve targeted audiences. The media element of plan implementation was the responsibility of the university information office. The media element of plan implementation focused primarily upon mass communication of the plan's themes. A coordinated program of press releases, editorial statements, print and electronic media advertising, and speaking events based upon the themes of the plan was to form the core of activities for the media element of plan implementation.

The alumni association was assigned responsibility for the outreach element of plan implementation. The function of the outreach element was the identification, recruitment, and mobilization of external support constituencies. The involvement of individuals and groups through the outreach element of the plan was intended to facilitate targeted communication of the themes of the plan. Individuals and groups involved in the plan's outreach would also be available for communication to state legislators.

The third element of plan implementation--referred to as legislative--was the responsibility of the office of the chief executive officer of the institution. The legislative element of

the plan involved the daily and routine monitoring of state legislative affairs. Specific activities within the legislative element of plan implementation included issue and interest identification, definition of institutional position and response, and coordination of statehouse involvement of institutional constituencies.

A major effort was made in planning for implementation to identify and involve as many groups and individuals as possible. In addition to the obvious internal and external constituencies (e.g., students, alumni, faculty), much attention was given to involving non-traditional constituencies (e.g., professional associations, organized labor, service clubs, chambers of commerce) in plan implementation.

The final component included in the legislative relations plan was a timetable for implementation. The timetable was based upon a 120-calendar day period, which coincided with the duration of the 1987 session of the state legislature. The timetable identified three phases for plan implementation. The first phase involved a 20-day period of campaign organization. This period of time was devoted to developing materials, scheduling appearances, and identifying and mobilizing participants.

The second phase identified in the timetable consisted of a 75-day period. During this time, participants were trained, messages were delivered, and endorsements of individuals and

groups were solicited. The second phase of the timetable involved activities of support building.

The third and final phase in the planned timetable was devoted to translating the previous 95-days' activities into action in the state legislature. This 25-day period, during which the state legislative session would become most intense, was devoted to communication of constituent support for the university to state legislators.

Discussion

Plan implementation coincided with the convening of the legislature. The development of the institutional plan for state legislative relations was completed at approximately the same time that the governor presented appropriations recommendations. The second and third phases of plan implementation coincided with public legislative hearings on the university's and governor's appropriations requests, legislative committee mark-up and reporting, floor action and passage by the legislature.

The major intention in developing the plan was to improve the commitment of state resources to the institution. Appropriations requested and realized, therefore, were considered the primary measure of plan efficacy. The institutional and governor's appropriations requests had been formulated before the plan was developed or implemented. The university requested \$177.7 million for 1987-88. The funding for 1986-87 had been \$166.2 million.

Thus, the university request represented a 6.9% average annual increase in state support for the institution. The governor recommended \$164.8 million for 1987-88 or 92.7% of the university's request. This was a decline of .8% from the previous year's funding.

The 1987-88 appropriation to the university was \$176.2 million representing 99.2% of the university's request. This was a 6% increase of funding compared to 1986-87. This represented the first increase in state support in five years. The appropriation presented the prospect of financial stability and no mid-year budget reduction. The appropriation also contained evidence of long-term program commitments in areas such as research.

Evidence of the success of the plan other than the reported funding increase is primarily anecdotal. Formal evaluation or measurements of success were not planned. Anecdotal evidence of success included comments made by legislators, lobbyists, leaders of interest groups, faculty, alumni, students, and leaders of business and industry. These comments reflected a perception that a well-planned strategy had been integral to the success of the institution in the 1987 legislative session.

Although not explicitly included as an objective, quantifiable evaluation criterion, utilization of all institutional resources was another objective of the plan. Anecdotal evidence suggests that team efforts characterized the

implementation of the plan. Project teams comprised of faculty, staff, students, administration, and alumni were assembled for various subelements of plan implementation. These project teams have, for the most part, remained active beyond the 1987 legislative session.

Efforts were undertaken in the 1988 legislative session to seek additional state general fund support. The legislative objective was focused on the adoption of a three-year employee salary improvement plan and program of state support for university research programs. The institution requested an increase of 12.4%, or \$21.8 million, over 1987-88 funding. The governor recommended a total appropriation, less salary increases, of \$165.2 million, a decrease of 6.2% over previous year funding. The legislature finally appropriated an increase of 11.6%, or \$20.4 million, bringing the total 1988-89 state general fund appropriation to \$196.6 million.

The 1989 legislative session again saw a request from the university for an increase in state support. For 1989-90, the university requested appropriations of \$228.6 million, an increase of 16.3% over previous year funding. The governor's recommendations were for appropriations of \$219 million, an 11.4% increase over 1988-89. The appropriations ultimately made by the legislature to the university were for \$223.4 million, an increase of 13.6% over 1988-89. In total, state general fund support for

the university increased by \$47.2 million, or 26.8%, between 1987 and 1989.

The legislative strategy used by the institution during the 1988 and 1989 legislative sessions was essentially the same as that designed and implemented in 1987. Experience suggests that several changes and improvements to the basic legislative strategy can be made. For example, a data base of citizen attitudes concerning the university and related issues would lend precision to the legislative relations program and allow measurement of the effectiveness of program activities. Also, it is felt that the legislative relations plan would be strengthened by a year-round effort. Changes and improvements to the state legislative relations plan of the institution have been hindered by a number of factors, including changes in personnel assignments and the departure of key participants in plan design and implementation.

Conclusion/Implications

A case study of an institutional plan for state legislative relations has been reported. For the short term, the planning process was successful when measured by its goals and objectives. Resources were increased and stabilized for the university. The plan did involve institution-wide coordination and a diverse constituency from the entire state. The effort provided a positive experience for the institution's constituents.

Several lessons were learned from the actual implementation of this planning process. First, clear and explicit assignment of state legislative relations planning responsibility is necessary for efficiency and effectiveness. Second, public postsecondary education exists in a very complex and fluid environment. As a result, state legislative relations planning should incorporate a continuous environmental scanning process to determine changes in issues, participants, and attitudes both internal and external to the institution. Third, the plan should involve a continuous year-round process. If state legislative relations planning is not a year-round process, many major decisions will be made by the institution without reference to their political viability. Fourth, the plan lacked explicit assessment, evaluation, and feedback components. Based on the experience with the planning model, it is apparent that an explicit evaluation component needs to be added to the model. The challenge of an evaluation component is that many outcomes associated with state legislative relations are nonobjective and nonquantifiable. Much of the evaluation must be based upon personal judgment and anecdotal evidence. Figure 2 represents a revised model that includes environmental scanning and assessment, evaluation, and feedback components.

On a final note, total success in the appropriations process cannot be attributed to this plan since other variables were

present in the state. However, anecdotal evidence collected from institutional participants and state legislators suggests that a consistent, unified institutional effort was a major reason for the successes achieved in 1987, 1988, and 1989.

Recommendations

Institutions must recognize that state legislatures will assume an increasingly important role in determining post-secondary financing and policy in the future. Institutions will need to become more actively involved in state legislative affairs. Institutions of postsecondary education should plan for state legislative relations. A model for institutional planning for state legislative relations is proposed. The model presented is based on actual implementation. The revised state legislative relations planning model reflects several considerations realized from the experience reported in this case study. First, the plan should involve continuous environmental scanning. Second, the plan should be a year-round, on-going process. Third, it should be easily understood, serve as a motivator, and communicate an imperative. Finally, assessment, evaluation, and feedback components should be included in the plan to assure institutional goal attainment. Proper planning for state legislative relations can benefit colleges and universities in both increased state support and improved working relationships among institutional constituents.

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FIGURE 1

1987 Institutional Plan for State Legislative Relations

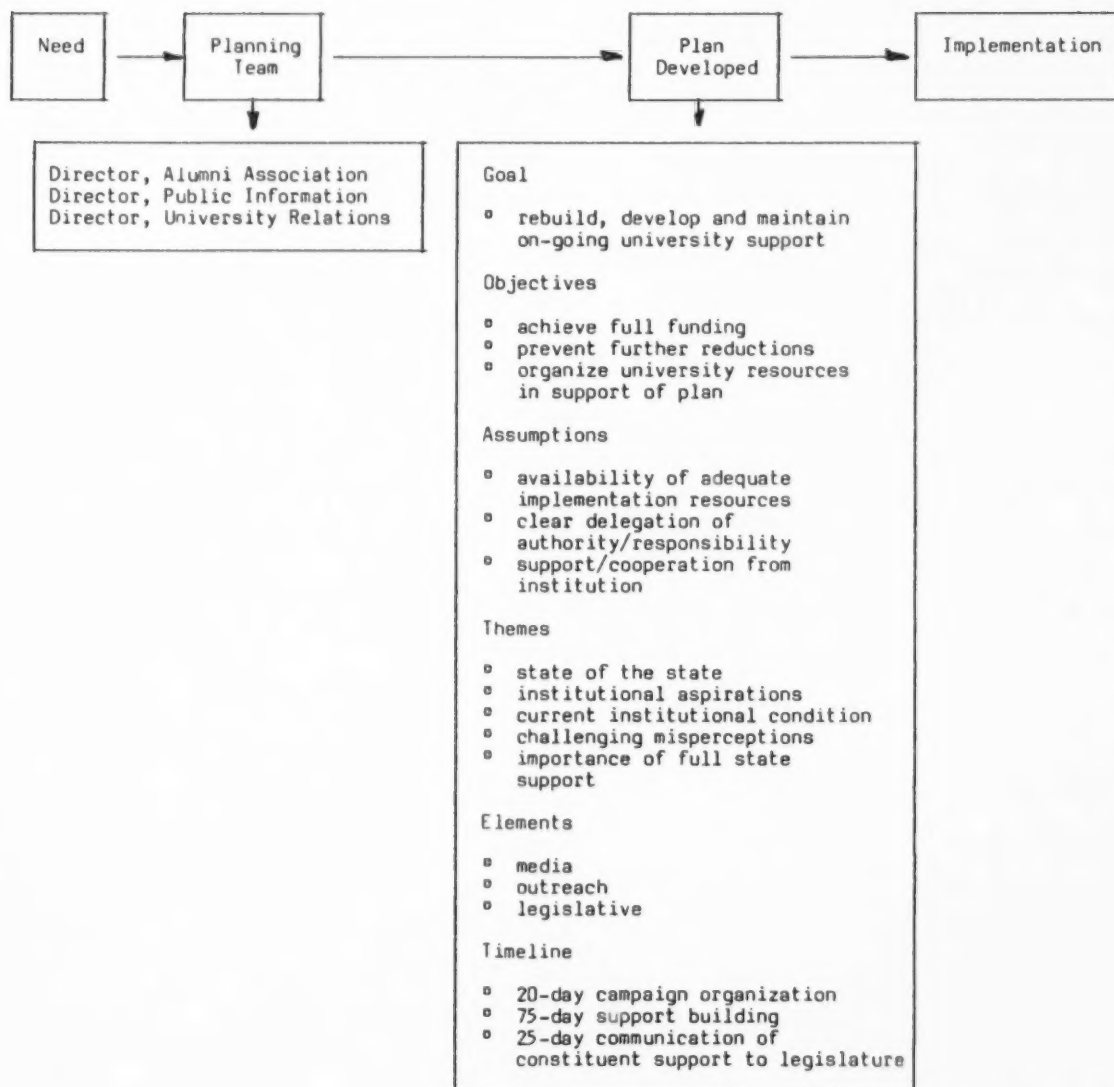


FIGURE 2
Planning Model for State Legislative Relations

